



WALKING WONDERS: James Lasdun and Pia Davis guide travelers on a series of trails that go into vineyards, olive groves, forests and mountains in *Walking and Eating in Tuscany and Umbria* (Penguin, \$20.) They provide 40 itineraries from half-day and full-day walks to routes stretching over several days.

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Scotland's aura



Dunnottar Castle sits atop an enormous flat-topped rock. Steep cliffs on all but one side of it ensured that enemies would have a difficult time infiltrating. Mel Gibson fans will recognize the ruin, which was the location for his film "Hamlet." —PHOTOS BY DENTON MORRIS/FOR THE SUN-TIMES

Calming countrysides, grand castles and sumptuous cuisine give the country its own personality

BY JAE-HA KIM
Staff Reporter

ABERDEEN, SCOTLAND — Yes, Scots eat haggis and talk with accents as thick as the blood used in their beloved black pudding. Their love of football (that's soccer to us Yanks) is equaled only by the desire for good conversation. And they welcome strangers into their country with open arms and a big hearty "ello!"

Just don't make the mistake of calling one of them a Brit. They're Scottish.

Scotland has become almost a caricature of itself in the American media with comics imitating Sean Connery's brogue and Mike Myers "If it's not Scottish, it's crap!" skits on "Saturday Night Live." Often viewed as less cosmopolitan than England but not pastoral enough to be as pretty as Switzerland, Scotland actually is all that and more. With some fabulous gourmet restaurants, the gorgeous

countryside and some of the most amazing castles and ruins — all within a few hours drive — Scotland is a wonderful destination for travelers who want it all without having to learn another language.

I started my trip in Scotland's laid-back Orkney Islands — which lie just north of the mainland. Remember that thing about calling Scots British? Refer to any of the 19,000 inhabitants of the Orkney Islands as a Scot and he or she will politely but firmly inform you they are not Scots. They're Orcadians.

They may live just a few miles north of mainland Scotland, but they are an entity unto themselves. Unlike residents of cosmopolitan Edinburgh and nouveau chic Glasgow, Orcadians don't revel in trendy nightlife or upscale boutiques catering to the rich and bored.

Instead, they welcome curious tourists who somehow found their way to the islands with directions to the nearest pub or the shopping center in its quaint downtown area.

Once the land of Vikings, the Scandinavian influence still is prevalent in the Orkneys. On the island of Shapinsay, a group of seals suns themselves near Burroughston Broch,



Impossibly cute lambs can be seen everywhere during lambing season. They were usually tailed by fierce-looking moms (background) who glared and bleated at tourists.

an ancient Viking stronghold. In nearby Stromness, you can see Scandinavian greetings carved into the walls of the ancient tombs at Maes Howe. Their literal translation isn't far off from today's graffiti of "Sven was here."

Orkney consists of some 70 islands, only 16 of which are inhabited. Most

locals live in Kirkwall and Stromness, and they will be the first to admit there isn't much of a nightlife other than a club called Fusion. But let's face it. The Orkneys aren't about nightclubs.

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... AND THEY WELCOME STRANGERS INTO THEIR COUNTRY WITH OPEN ARMS AND A BIG HEARTY, 'ELLO!

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